

Ambassador Scott H. DeLisi's Opening Remarks
"The Changing Face of Media" Seminar
Malla Hotel, Dec 14, 2011 at 9:00

I'm so glad to see so many friends and colleagues in the media attending this seminar today. I note that this is a young audience but not exclusively so. I can tell you, however, that although social media may be driven by youthful users this is NOT a topic only for the young and even old graybeards like myself, need to be aware and engaged in using this new resource. This is, without question, an important topic for Nepal, where the number of people using the Internet is increasing at an incredible rate and where, quite simply, the internet is changing the nature of public interaction not only in society but in the workplace as well.

When I first arrived in Nepal about a year and a half ago, Internet penetration was thought to be around 4%. That figure, which may be up to 5% or so, does not, however, begin to reflect the actual number of Nepalis who are using the internet. You need only to look at the growing number of users in internet cafes and the increasing use of smart phones to access the internet to know that the audience is growing at a breakneck pace.

This should not surprise anyone. The Internet is a powerful tool that allows people to connect with each other and share information and the people of this country want to take advantage of it. Nepalis, be they entrepreneurs in Kathmandu or farmers in remote districts, recognize the value of this tool and are learning to use it.

The American Embassy is capitalizing on the growth of social media in Nepal and I would say that our social media outreach is one of the most vibrant among all American embassies in South Asia.

Our Embassy's Facebook page currently has 18,500 fans. We post information about Embassy programs, American culture, and anything we think would be of interest to our followers. USAID has a page where we share information on our robust development programs. Even our consular section uses Facebook to share information with targeted audiences.

We update the Facebook page every day, and we try new things to see what resonates with our followers. Visas are always a popular topic, so we recently started posting a "Visa tip of the week" to provide useful information and answer common questions about the visa process.

My own Facebook page has 7,000 fans. The page has become a forum for interesting conversations with Nepalis from all walks of life. I check my Facebook page every day and I'm always learning something new from my Facebook followers.

Clearly, our social media tools are changing the way we do business. Never before has the Embassy, or the American Ambassador to Nepal, had such direct interaction with so many people.

Of course we've always engaged with Nepalis through our exchange programs, cultural activities, and traditional methods of communication. The Embassy still issues press releases and I still give interviews to print journalists. But I also do web chats and answer questions on my Facebook page. Social media allow us to interact directly with the people of Nepal, without a third-party filter.

When we post something about U.S. policy or culture on Facebook, it will be seen by tens of thousands of people. And those tens of thousands of people might pass it along to their friends. That's the real power of social media – the marketplace of ideas is controlled by the masses, not by the few. If an idea strikes a chord with a large number of people, that idea will grow.

Recently I posted a comment on my Facebook page about a possible bandh. I expressed my concern that “using violence to deny others the right to live their lives, go to work, attend school, or move freely cannot be tolerated” and I hoped that the bandh organizers would “respect in practice the democratic values they espouse in principle.”

Clearly this struck a nerve among my Facebook followers. Within an hour, people responded to my post like never before, liking, sharing, and commenting on it in record numbers.

This Facebook comment also appeared in numerous newspapers and web sites. The bandh was subsequently called off and many people suggested my comment was the reason. I think that they may have been wrong about that; the PM meeting with the concerned parties and promising the government would look into their concerns was much more likely the reason for the decision not to go ahead with the strike.

But, that doesn't take away from the important lesson to be drawn from the use of social media. I do believe that my Facebook comment helped galvanize and amplify popular opposition to the culture of bandh. It gave people a forum in which to articulate their concern collectively and to a place and opportunity to voice their deep-seated frustration with these bandhs. If it did help influence the organizers to cancel it, great, but I am equally pleased if it encouraged a necessary social dialogue on a key issue.

This was not the first time one of my Facebook comments was quoted in a newspaper. Many journalists tell me they read my page regularly. In fact, Facebook is becoming a powerful tool for the Embassy to communicate with the general Nepali public, rivaling traditional methods such as press releases and op-ed pieces.

You may have heard about the ongoing debate about the use of hybrid seeds in Nepal. We deliberately chose to use Facebook as the tool to articulate our stance on this issue, rather than an op-ed, because posting a note on Facebook allowed us to

share a detailed explanation of our views, to control the timing of its delivery, and to reach our online audience directly.

For me, the discussion about hybrid seeds raised many important and fundamental issues about the direction of Nepal's agricultural policy. This is a discussion worth having between Nepali citizens and their government. I think our use of social media has contributed to various stakeholders participating in a thoughtful discussion about using modern techniques in Nepal's agricultural development.

Both of these examples also highlight how social media facilitate a two-way dialogue. Unlike traditional media, social media allow for instant and broad feedback. Facebook metrics tell us which topics are most popular with our followers. Twitter can illustrate what are the hot topics people are talking about on a particular day.

When the State Department cancelled the travel warning for Nepal last week, we tweeted that announcement. It was retweeted 68 times. And those retweets were retweeted by countless others. That kind of reaction to our social media messages is important feedback for us.

And we learn from this feedback, both the positive and the negative. Like anywhere else, not all feedback gleaned from social media is useful. The freedom that allows people to post insightful comments and questions on my Facebook page is the same freedom that allows them to post requests for job interviews and visa inquiries—even though I had earlier stipulated that I would not respond to visa questions on my page.

Not long ago I posed this question to my Facebook followers: Should I allow followers to post anything on my wall, or should I restrict them to only responding to my postings? I listened to my followers and decided to keep my Facebook page open.

While this means occasionally dealing with unhelpful comments or questions, the fact that any Nepali can post anything on my wall (as long as it is respectful) is itself a message about openness and transparency. In the year and a half that the Embassy has been engaging with Nepalis through social media, we have developed a reputation as being accessible, responsive and in-touch with the Nepali people. I'm very proud of that.

A year ago, I could not have predicted that my Facebook page would be frequently quoted in the Nepali newspapers. It's equally impossible for me to predict what changes social media will bring in the future. But it's clear that our various social media tools – from Facebook and Twitter to web chats and YouTube – will continue to allow us to control our message and reach a broad spectrum of the Nepali population.

Social media have changed the way the Embassy does business. And they are changing the way Nepalis share information with each other. I hope this seminar will

help media professionals understand this transformation and inspire you to be the leaders of the social media movement in Nepal.

Thank you.